

CHRONICLE
OF THE HOLY CITY OF
PERPERIKON

Nikolay Ovcharov



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OF THE HOLY CITY OF
PERPERIKON

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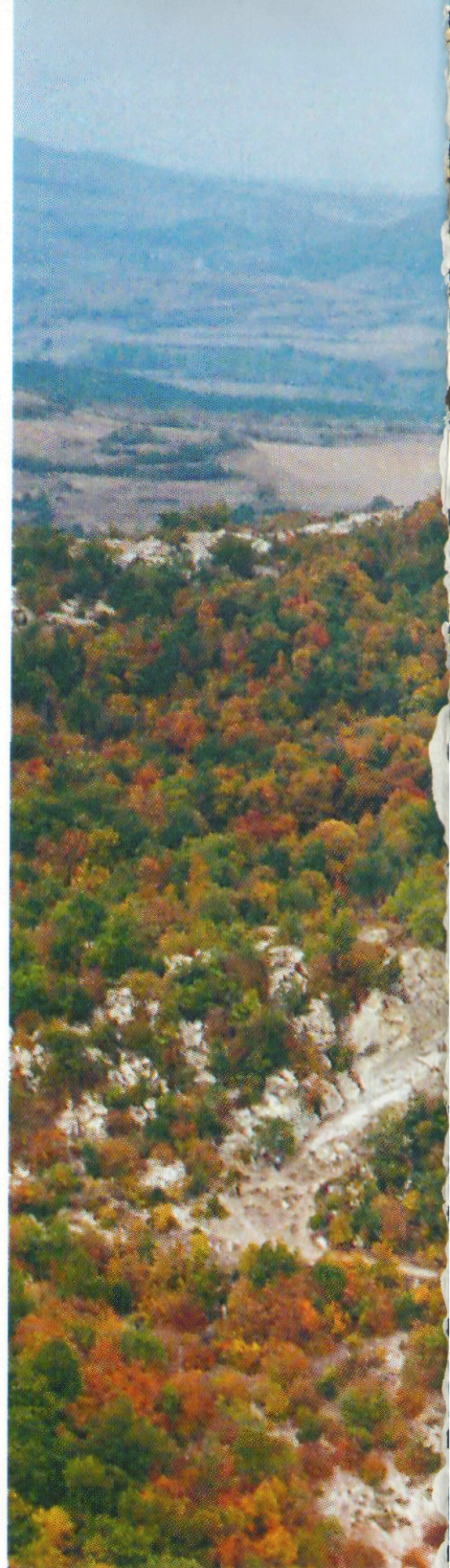
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*P*erhaps this happened in the Holy Mount, as the ancient people called it, or the Rhodope as we call it today. The scene was a bare rock peak, weirdly shaped somewhere in the depths of the history of the planet Earth. Much later it would be called Perperikon. Under it since time immemorial flows the little Perpereshka River, whose gold-bearing sands strongly attracted the master of the planet – Man. It irrigates a wonderful valley, which is one of the most fertile spots in the Eastern Rhodopes. Therefore this place was inhabited since ancient times.

View of the Holy Mount



*Ancient stone creations
in the sea of clouds*



Aerial view of Perperikon

6th millennium BC

A small group of human beings has recently settled by the river. The New Stone Age people are farmers and they liked the in abundant water area. With their primitive stone tools they can till the land and live off it. Although they are newcomers, they have

already set up a small village of primitive dwellings, where dogs bark merrily and bare-footed kids play.

Months ago the people from the group have made what was a giant passage. They left the large age-old settlement in the territory of present-day Kardjali and went to seek their luck in foreign lands. According to pres-

ent-day measures this is about twenty kilometers, but to the ancient people this was tantamount to a tour round the world. Through unfamiliar forests and mountains people clad in skins sought the fertile valley described in old legends. But it was not only the fertile land that made them leave their hearth.

From ancient times they believed in the Sun God. The shamans in the big settlement bore its symbol on their breasts – bright-green nephrite swastikas. Legends unconfirmed by any living man had it that a rock peak towered the distant unknown valley,

which at dawn was the first to see the Divine Sun.

After long misadventures the human beings who had split from the tribe were convinced in this. They went up the stream of the high-water river, which after many millennia would be called Arda. Wandering in the thick forests on its left bank, several days later they reached the mouth of a small tributary. Vague tribal memories made them go upstream. Late in the night, they crossed some hills in the dark and descended in a wide valley. Early in the morning, with the first rays of the sun, shivering with the morning dew the people saw

In anticipation of the first sunrays on Perperikon





Traces of ancient civilizations



The evil demons of the prehistoric inhabitants of Perperikon

the rock bathed in bright light. Indescribably magnificent and at the same time awesome. The stone home of the Sun God.

Actually, this was the main reason they left their native land and found themselves at the foot of the rocky mount. These people became

the first priests of the Sun God. They put their sacrifices directly on the bare surfaces of the rock massif. Many years later, archaeologists would find pieces of their primitive hand-glued ceramic vessels and would be overjoyed like kids.

Summer sunset over Perperikon



4th millennium BC

The cult to the Sun God has been performed by the priests at the rock peak for centuries on end. Meanwhile people have discovered the first metal – copper. After millen-

nia scientists of the future would explore a New Stone Age settlement not far away, at one end of the large valley, and would find out how this happened. The shamans accidentally came upon some shining stones, which could not be worked as the other stones. In his

The majestic cliffs of the Rhodope Mountains





The stone is as white as the sun



The rocks worshiped by the ancient people

anger, one of them threw some in the burning fire. Suddenly the stones burst into wonderful fireworks. At first people fled in panic, but later curiosity prevailed and they came back to the fireplace.

Thus man discovered the copper ore. Initially the priests used it in the Sun God rituals making "divine fireworks" with it. Later someone found out that the melted mass solidifies and can acquire the forms of the implements hitherto made of flint. Humankind imperceptibly entered the Stone Copper Age and this changed their way of life.

At that time the shrine on the stone peak was a sacred place known even beyond the Rhodopes. Actually, it was this shrine that

made the mountains Holy, as near it and along the Arda river valley dozens of new consecrated grounds sprang up. Like the chief sanctuary, they invariably stood on prominent stone massifs first lit by the rays of the rising sun. The ancient people chose hills with vertical or very steep slopes that could be climbed only from one side. On the not so high but necessarily visible from faraway top there had to be a flat spot where the rituals were performed and where the access was restricted. Thus originated the idea of the sacred space, which would later be embodied in the temples of all major world religions.

But let us travel back through the millennia and look at the stone hill. It is an early



The hills of the gods in the Holy Mount

morning and today is the great celebration of the Sun God. At the foot of the rock heap hundreds of people have gathered from the neighboring villages. They are all praying for fertility and health. At the leveled ridge fenced with cliffs there are but a few men. These are the priests of the Sun God, dressed in the skins of killed mountain beasts of prey. They are fussing about, going in and out of a

few wattle structures daubed with clay. Actually these were the first temples built to serve the gods.

Behind the nearby hills the first rays of the sun gleam and the people stir. Fires flame up on the rocks and the priests start singing and dancing wildly round them. These rituals are necessary to enable the elect to communicate with the souls of the dead. The unearthly



The flint knife of the high priest



Semi-precious stone arrows given as gifts to the Sun God

ecstasy is provoked by an intoxicating herb, whose infusion is kept in little clay vessels in the shape of a partridge. The images of the formidable evil spirits, predatory fish heads with gaping mouths roughly sculpted out of clay, are taken out from the sheds. Of course, here is also the clay disc with weird rows of incised lines. Actually, this is the first elementary calendar by which the ancient peo-

ple counted the days, months and years.

Then the shamans' assistants place on the bare rocks the gifts to the Sun God brought by the inhabitants. These are clay statuettes having the rounded shapes and swollen breasts of pregnant women. Numerous earthenware containing food for the god and the dead. On little four-legged cult tables lie valuable for the ancient people objects – minia-

ture semiprecious stone arrows, cut so finely that the light transpires through them, models of clay vessels, different articles of the rare metal copper.

Finally the sun rises. The chief priest is holding up against it a long knife of wax flint. In the Holy Mountain this material is not found and such dear objects are imported from the foreign lands behind another great mountain, which the descendants would call Stara Planina. There, by the tract of the sea, is one of the most important religious centers. Against the products of fine wax flint, the inhabitants of the Holy Mountain gave drops and pieces of the glittering yellow metal which the mountain was rich in. These were too soft to make tools from, but were very attractive and reflected the light in an incredible way. There was hearsay that out of this metal the seaside people made beautiful adornments, amulets and even scepters for religious rites.

The chief priest, bathed in the rays of the Sun God, solemnly breaks the knife in three

parts and carefully lays them in a crack in the rock. His assistants put away the ceramic vessels with the food and objects for the god in other clefts in the rock. From time immemorial they placed the gifts in the 3-4 m deep cracks, caused by earthquakes, which formed a closely knit network over the whole surface of the hill. In the plain the gifts were buried in pits dug in the earth, but here there was no way to cut the stone.

At nightfall the people have gone back to their villages and at the stone peak only a few priests keep the fires going. It is early autumn and the wind blows the fallen yellowing leaves in the rock clefts. By next spring the leaves would rot away and turn into a handful of dust. This would happen every year for millennia on end. Until the clefts get filled up and bury the objects with meters of dust. Until 6000 years later when the gifts to the Sun God are suddenly lit by his light, dug up by the descendants of the Stone Copper Age people.

Here the ancestors worshiped the Sun God





During the Bronze Age people continued to honor the rocks

14th century BC

The Late Bronze culture is a crucial point in the history of human development. In the Eastern Mediterranean it shines with the monuments of the Cretan-Mycenaean or Minoan civilization, which was a huge leap of the peoples in Southeastern Europe and Asia Minor. The Late Bronze Age ended with one of the first epic historical events described by human pen – the Trojan War. Unfortunately, the story was recorded much later and was based on oral tradition. Most of the diverse myths and legends from the Late Bronze Age

remained unwritten and they can be surmised from the survived images.

This period was crucial also for the rock peak-sanctuary in the Eastern Rhodopes. For millennia the people had worshipped the stone heap, honored the Sun God and placed clay vessels with sacrificial food in the cracks. They tried to cut the rock with their primitive flint and copper tools already in the Stone Copper Age. With great efforts they widened the upper parts of the earthquake clefts to form repositories for the cult ceramics.

All this continued during the third millennium BC, when the people on the Balkan

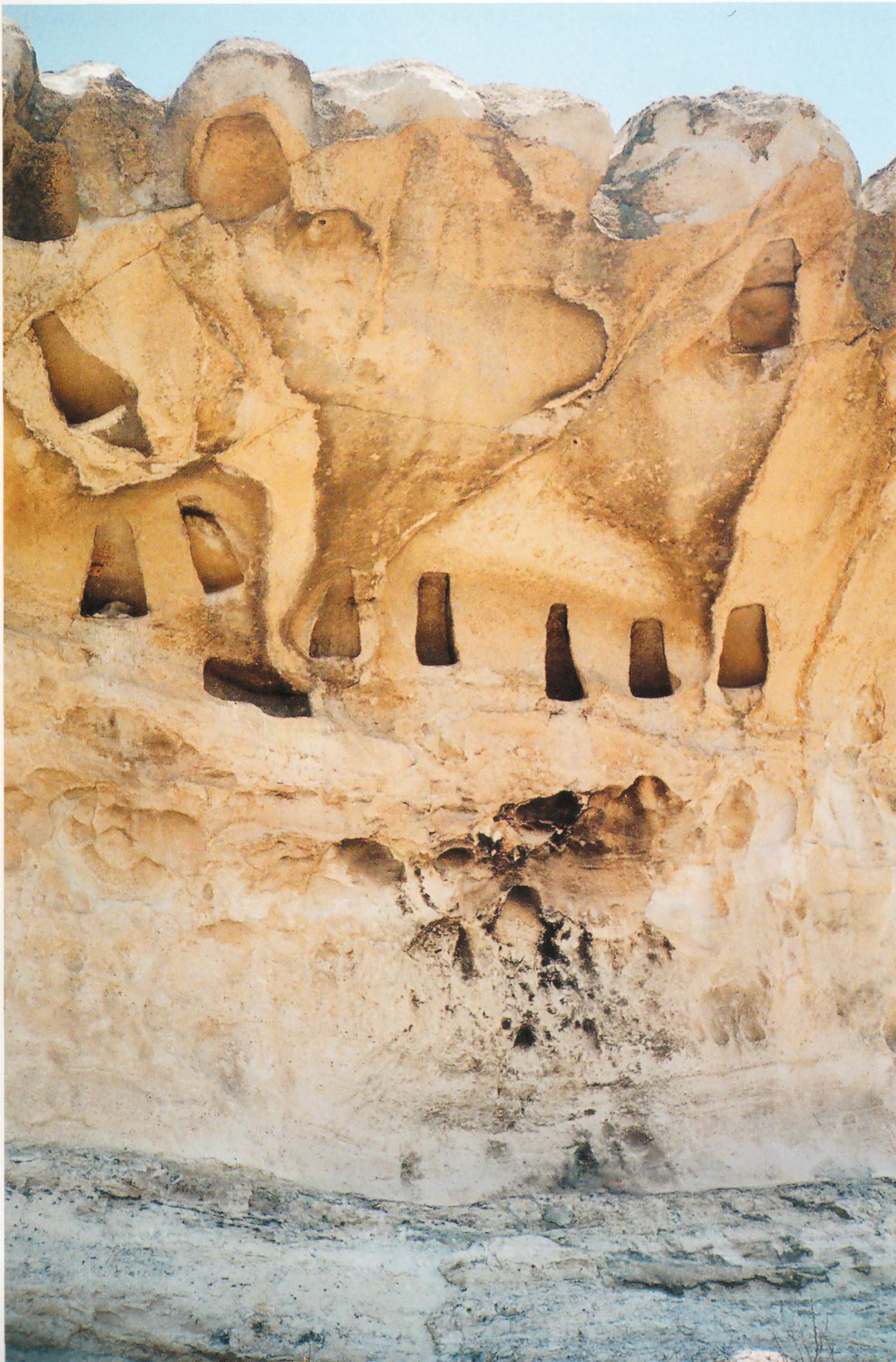
Peninsula discovered the bronze. This new metal allowed the making of much more sophisticated implements and arms, which immensely increased the social importance of men as warriors and hunters. We can speak of real cutting of the hard rock, however, only with the improved tools of the Late Bronze Age. It was then that people managed to cut out in the rocks their earliest altars, which later grew into temples. The numerous later

cuttings to a great extent destroyed the initial buildings. Yet, here and there layers abounding in 18th-12th c. BC ceramics are preserved. Some fragments are from extremely rare imported vessels, brought here all the way from the coast of the Sea of Marmora through the first in history trade relations.

Perhaps already then representative buildings had been cut in the rocks, similar to the famous palaces in Crete and the adjacent

Man can already hew stone and cut out shrines in it





*The rocks
worked by
human hands
are silent
witnesses of
the past*

islands. One unique monument, an excerpt from a stone inscription, is still inexplicable. In it three signs from the Cretan linear script A, used till 15th-14th c. BC, have survived. This is the first find of this kind in the interior of Thrace, which raises the extremely important question of the links with the Cretan-Mycenaean culture.

According to one modern scientific hypothesis, most of the early shrines represented artificial caves cut out in the rocks. Gradually they became numerous and disturbed the balance of the stone peak. Then the catastrophe occurred – a strong earthquake, which destroyed nearly all caves. In fact, this must be one of those terrible natural cataclysms

which also destroyed the great Minoan palaces on Crete and the other islands.

Whether the initial cult ensemble was in cut out premises with some roof construction or in caves it is hard to say today. In any case, the builders had a major problem – how to drain the buildings from the heavy rainfall. For this purpose they skillfully used the existing cracks and cut out gutters by which rainwater flowed away to the foot of the hill. This drainage system would be developed during the following centuries. Some of the facilities, however, were abandoned in antiquity and were ritually filled up with crushed ceramics. It was the typical pieces of clay vessels, some of which were fully restored, that helped

Ancient people depicted the gods with sun heads



archaeologists date the earliest cuttings in the rock.

One almost wholly preserved vessel reversed the idea of the people from this epoch. Over the entire surface of the walls and on the bottom, by incision and white-paste filling a mythological scene is drawn, the exact meaning of which will forever remain a hypothesis. It shows six human figures surrounding the central image of the Sun. The now incomprehensible imagination of the ancient artist depicted the people as flowers, their limbs representing leaves. Their heads are drawn as suns. There is reason to believe that some of the figures are male and some female.

These are ancient deities, whose names we will never learn. Gradually, alongside the Sun God other gods appeared, polytheistic religion emerged. This process was particularly strong in the Early Iron Age, 11th-6th c. BC. Actually, this was the time when the individual peoples were formed, such as the Hellenes and the Thracians. If for the Hellenes the origin of the Olympic system is well described, nearly nothing is known about the Thracian pantheon. Late Greek authors called the Thracian deities with the names of their own gods, although it is now definitely proven that the Thracian ones are far more ancient. This question is of paramount importance for the rock peak, later called Perperikon.

Alongside the Sun God appear other deities



480 BC

With an unseen before army and 1000 ships the dreaded Persian King Xerxes advanced in the Aegean towards ancient Greece. After the unsuccessful attempt of his father Darius, he had decided to do away with the insurgent Hellenic cities once and for all. One after

another fell the fortified seaside cities of Enos, Maronea, Abdera. From inland Thrace messengers from various Thracian tribes came to the Persian king bringing him pledge of loyalty.

Only messengers from the Satrians, who inhabited the Rhodopes, did not come to the king's camp. The great Greek historian



Herodotus wrote that they were the most freedom-loving and independent Thracian people. But something else is more remarkable about them. The Satrians kept the sanctuary of Dionysus, for centuries known throughout the antique world. Actually the shrine was looked after by their priests, the Bessians, and in later times all Thracians in

the Rhodopes would be called Bessians. At the shrine there was a prophetess, whose oracles were no less truthful than those of Pythia at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi.

Modern scientists have long been looking for the temple of Dionysus in the Holy Mountain. Not the carefree Hellenic god of wine and merrymaking but his ancient Thracian prototype, the somber and frightful subterranean deity Zagreus. It is considered that its finding will be equivalent to the discovery of the Troy or Mycenae. Most researchers focus on the Western Rhodopes because Herodotus wrote that the Satrian messengers came from the high snowcapped mountains.

It is well known that the Greek historian was not familiar with the interior of Thrace. Therefore his information is often inaccurate and contradictory. The same goes for the Persians, who advanced in a foreign country. From the Aegean cities they could only see the tall parts of the Southern Rhodopes, from where the snow did not go until late spring. It is not in vain that nowadays this ridge is called Gyumyurdjinski Snezhnik. None of the travelers supposed that behind the tall mountains lay the relatively low and convenient for living Eastern and Middle Rhodopes.

This is why from Herodotus' information we should accept only the general idea that the shrine is situated in the Holy Mountain, the Rhodopes. What is more interesting is that the Greek author specified that the sanctuary



The sun is shining through the clouds on the ancient Thracian megaliths



Ancient wine-stores hewn in the rock



was on a tall peak. This fact is inevitably associated with the well-known Thracians' cult to the rock massifs. It is no accident that they made some of the most imposing stone facilities, called "megaliths" (Gr. "big rocks") in modern science.

The largest megalithic ensemble on the Balkan Peninsula is on the hill called Perperikon. The initial cuttings out in the rocks from the end of the Bronze Age were continued during the Early Iron Age, 11th-6th c BC. The rich ceramic complex, found during regular archaeological excavations, dates

from the same period. Most shocking, however, was the discovery of a grandiose round stone altar of 2-m diameter cut out of the rock. It has a rim, and its smooth bottom is burnt by numerous fires. The altar rises three meters above the floor in the center of a spacious oval hall hewn into the rocks. There is an adjoining nearly square platform for the cult activities of the priests. On the floor beneath the sacrificial altar were found numerous pits cut into the rock, containing fragments from the Late Bronze, the Early Iron and the Late Iron Ages.



The mist of history shrouds the stone creations of the Thracians



The burnt stately altar to Dionysus-Zagreus

This remarkable facility is situated in the northwestern part of a grand ensemble of many rooms cut out of the rock. By all appearances, the hall with the round altar preceded the other parts of the complex. Most probably it was made at the end of the Bronze Age and was the earliest rock building on the hill. Unlike the other corpuses developed in several stories, it has no roof and is open to the sky.

These details are very important because they correspond exactly to the scarce information given by the antique authors about

the temple of Dionysus. According to the Roman historian Macrobius, the god's altar was located in a large roofless hall of oval shape. This is so because, according to the description of another Roman chronicler Suetonius, the future was told by the height of the fire flaming up towards the sky. But before the fire was lit, a glass of wine was spilt on the altar. This was the wine-colored rite, characteristic of the cult to the ancient god Dionysus-Zagreus.

Here we come to another hallmark of the landscape on the hill of Perperikon.

Wandering in the woods covering the slopes, one comes across hundreds, perhaps thousands of strange facilities hewn into the rocks. These are the so-called sharapans, presses for extraction of grape juice and making of wine. These sharapans have diverse form and size. The most massive reach three meters and have several chambers linked by canals. There are also very little ones, which could barely contain more than 2-3 liters of grape juice.

The parallels with different cultures and ages show that what we have at hand is the making of the sacred or mystery wine used for cult purposes. With the Thracians, the crushing and processing of the grapes was related to the cult to Dionysus and, according to the Orphic doctrine, it symbolically represented his dismembering by the titans. In fact, Orpheus, the singer of Dionysus, was also torn to pieces by the maenads and this is emphasized in the doctrine bearing his name. While they crushed the grapes, the Thracian women even sang mournful songs, remembering the crime of their predecessors, the maenads.

The mystery wine was made by communities, families or individual people. The quantity did not matter. It was important that the wine was made and stored on the holy hill. It was drunk during the rites at the festival of god Dionysus, the Dionysia, or as the Romans later called it, the Bacchanalia. Today we can only imagine the wild orgies and songs that once echoed in the rocks on the ancient peak.

Gold became equally important for the holy mount as the wine. Already the people from the Stone Copper Age were familiar with the bits of precious metal abounding in the sand of Perpereshka river and its tributaries. Later

they found the main deposit, at a stone's throw from the temple of Dionysus. It is an underground river petrified at the time of the Creation, where the native gold came not only in sand grains but in pieces as big as a fist. The Bessians learned to extract it and became famous worldwide. It is not in vain that the ancient authors called the Rhodopes "the gold-bearing mountain".



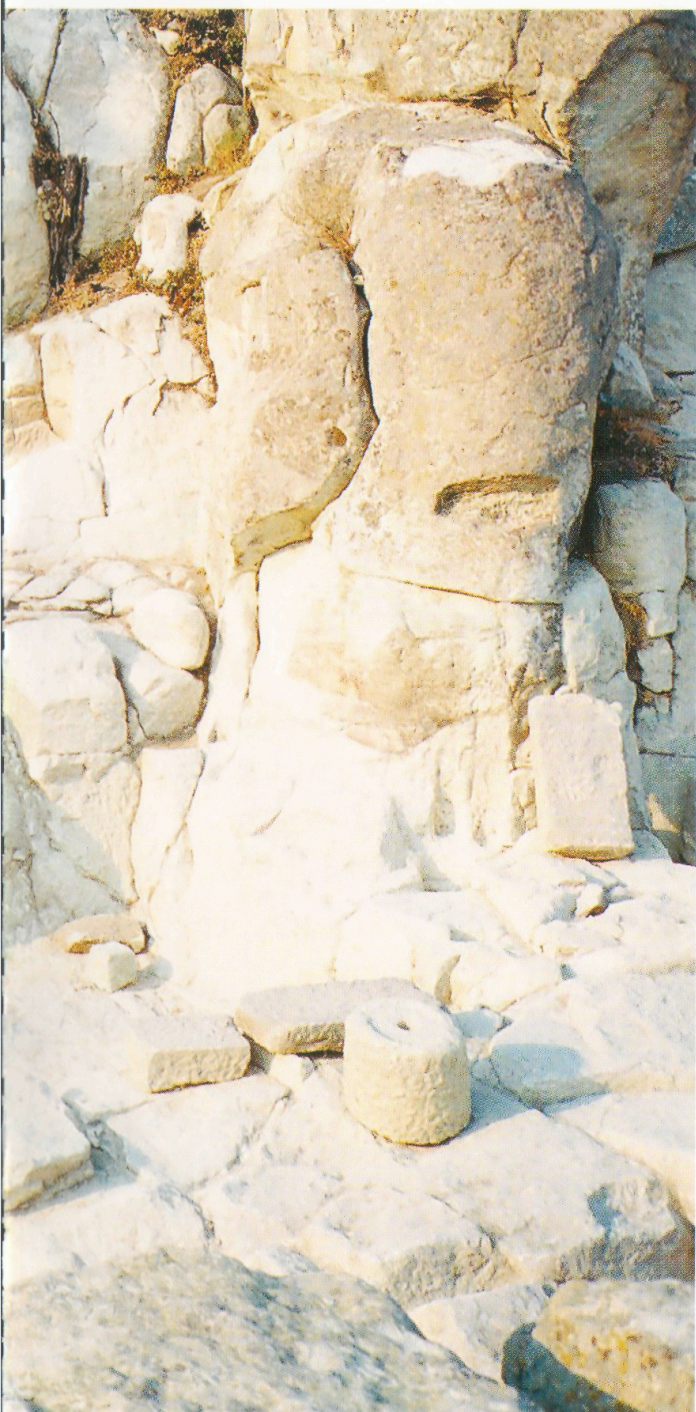
The winter of 334 BC

The warriors of the Macedonian phalanx are wrapped in their red cloaks. The searching winter wind blows about the feathers in their helmets. The little group is slowly climbing the slippery rocks of the stone peak. The men are secretly longing for the blazing fires, the wine and merry women left behind in the

camp in the valley. There is the whole Macedonian army, awaiting the month of April to march towards Asia and conquer the world.

But it is February now and the men are about a hundred kilometers deep in the wild mountain, which for some reason is called Holy. Wading in snowdrifts, they finally reach a fearful rock passage with steps crudely cut

The hall with the altar to Dionysus-Zagreus at Perperikon



The glitter of gold was not foreign to the Temple of Dionysus-Zagreus



A unique ring from the vicinity of Perperikon bearing the image of the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphos, a successor of Alexander the Great

into the stone leading steeply up. The steps are covered with ice and their climbing is arduous. In some ten minutes the warriors were rewarded. Before their eyes stood tall rocks of weird shape, surrounded by a strong wall of large blocks. Priests in white clothes awaited them silently at the threshold.

The men are shown in into a large oval hall. It has no roof and snowflakes come down from the clouded grey sky. In the center stands a huge stone altar, surrounded by burning torches. Priests fuss about on the platform next to it. One of them is the chief guardian of the sanctuary and chief of the Bessians. He is motionless, frozen by the altar with a stone face. In one hand he is holding a goblet with wine, in the other a burning torch. Beside him is a veiled priestess, who has already lapsed into a trance from the opiates.

The Macedonian warriors stand at the foot of the altar. They are lit by the flickering torch light. Everybody in the hall fixes their eyes on the leader, clad in gold-plated armor. The



*Another ring from the same
place with the image of a
lady-in-waiting*

unruly curls are thrown back to reveal the beautiful face of a twenty-year-old youth, which everyone has seen on the heavy silver tetradrachmas. This is Alexander, son of Philip and King of the Macedonians. He has already conquered the Balkans and is about to conquer the world. But first he has come to the Holy Mountain in the temple of Dionysus at the rock peak, which will later be called Perperikon. He has come to ask the priestess of the shrine if a mortal man can do such exploits.

Alexander receives the prophecy. In two months he will cross the Dardanelles and enter Asia for a decisive battle with the Persians. In May he will defeat them in a battle at the Granik River. Alexander will win many battles and reach India. His name will become a synonym of victor throughout human history. The oracle of the temple of Dionysus did not say only one thing to the youth – that he has only 11 years of life left. Did she not know or did she not wish to tell him?

The last decades of the 1st century BC

Alexander's visit to the shrine of Dionysus is described by the mentioned Roman writer Suetonius in the context of a quite different but no less significant event. It concerns the epoch when one of the most powerful empires of all time was born – the Roman Empire. The

republic has reached its apogee, extending the borders of Rome beyond measure. The pretenders to turn it into an authoritarian monarchy are many. Then somewhere in Thrace are the legions of Octavian, the father of the man who will go down in history as Guy Julius Caesar Octavian Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire. The ambitious father climbed to the sanctuary of Dionysus

More and more buildings were hewn out in the rocks of the hill



to ask the priests what the fate of his son would be. Let us quote Suetonius:

“When Octavian, father of Augustus, at the lead of his army came upon the Holy Mount of Dionysus, he asked the oracle about his son and it was confirmed by the priests that his son would be ruler of the world, for as the wine was spilt onto the altar, the fire blazed up to the sky – an

omen like the one Alexander the Great had received when he offered a sacrifice on the same altar.”

It was an eventful and dynamic epoch, full of conflicts and wars whose roots went far back in history. In the 5th-4th c. BC crucial events occurred among the numerous Thracian peoples. In the course of the centuries the state organizations of the different

Perperikon grew in the course of the centuries



tribes were formed. In present-day South Bulgaria the major tribes were the Odrysae and the Bessians, as the Satrians were already called in this epoch. There is documentary evidence that the former ethnic group inhabited the southern and southeastern parts of Thrace along the Maritsa river valley, and the latter one settled in the Rhodopes and the adjacent zone of the Maritsa Valley.

It was then that the large tribe of the Odrysae made a resolute attempt to unite the Thracians in a single state. The kings Teres and Sitalk expanded their empire and for some time turned it into an important factor for the entire Mediterranean. But even in the heyday of the Odrysian state its rulers did not succeed in subjugating the Bessians. After its downfall, the Bessians quickly recovered the temporarily lost territories and even invaded the Thracian Valley. In a general chronological aspect, modern researchers of historical geography of the Thracians invariably place the border between the Odrysae and the Bessians east of today's Kardjali. Thus, till the 1st c. BC the shrine of Dionysus was kept by the priests of this people.

Apparently, Octavian's visit of the sanctuary and the following Roman expansion on the Balkans changed things radically. By order of his son and future Roman Emperor August, in 29-28 BC general Marcus Licinius Crassus undertook a fateful march into Thrace. The formal reason for the invasion was the insurgency of the Thracian tribes, but historical sources, as is often the case, leave us guessing. The final result of the march was that the shrine of Dionysus in the Rhodopes

was taken away from the Bessians and given over to the Odrysae, as they were sworn worshippers of this god.



11 BC

Only eleven years before the birth of the new god Christ. The Odrysae have been masters of the shrine of Dionysus on the hill of Perperikon for more than a decade now. For some reason, however, the thousands of visi-

tors who climbed the rock hill to hear prophecies in the famous place have gone. It is not that in the hall with the altar there are no priests but nobody believes in their visions of the future.

Modern science has provided an answer to this strange phenomenon. The names of the

The Temple of the Great Mother Goddess hidden in the rocks



Thracian peoples are actually the names of their millennial king-priest families. Such as the Getae, the Tribals, the Edones, and the Odrysae in their ancient territory. With all of them the high priest was also king of the tribe who on certain days of the year performed the main rites. However, the only such tribe explicitly mentioned in historical sources are the Bessians, who guarded the temple of Dionysus in the Rhodope Mountains.

The last priest and king of the Bessians at the invasion of the Romans and the Odrysae was Vologez. With a group of loyal people he withdrew into the heart of the great mountain, somewhere around present-day Zlatograd. There, on the top of a large massif stands a grandiose heap of white stones – the oldest sanctuary of the Bessians. There are no buildings. The stony hill is surrounded by tall

mountains within a diameter of dozens of kilometers. This is the most large-scale and close to divine nature idea of the Thracians of the circular “sanctified” space, which would later be repeatedly reproduced in various architectural structures.

It was here, at the honored since time immemorial “White Stones”, that Vologez made fateful predictions. About war and a sea of blood in which the kings-priests of the Odrysae and many people of the tribe would perish. Bessians from the whole mountain came here and soon the warriors numbered thousands. Led by Vologez, this strong army marched to the east. In a few days the temple of Dionysus was liberated and the invaders were chased away from the Rhodopes.

The thirst for revenge, however, was not

Close-up of the mysterious Thracian niches





satisfied. The fierce army of the Bessians went into the Thracian Valley and defeated the Odrysae in several consecutive battles. The young ruler Raskuporis, son of the famous king Kotis, was killed. Then his uncle Remetalk, who was his guardian, was defeated and driven away to foreign lands. After the suppression of the Bessians' revolt the Romans would make him king of the Odrysae.

In the summer of 11 BC the Bessians were triumphant and devastated the land of their enemies. Soon they reached the heart of the state – the Gallipoli Peninsula situated on the European side of the Dardanelles opposite the ruins of ancient Troy. Then the Romans interfered.

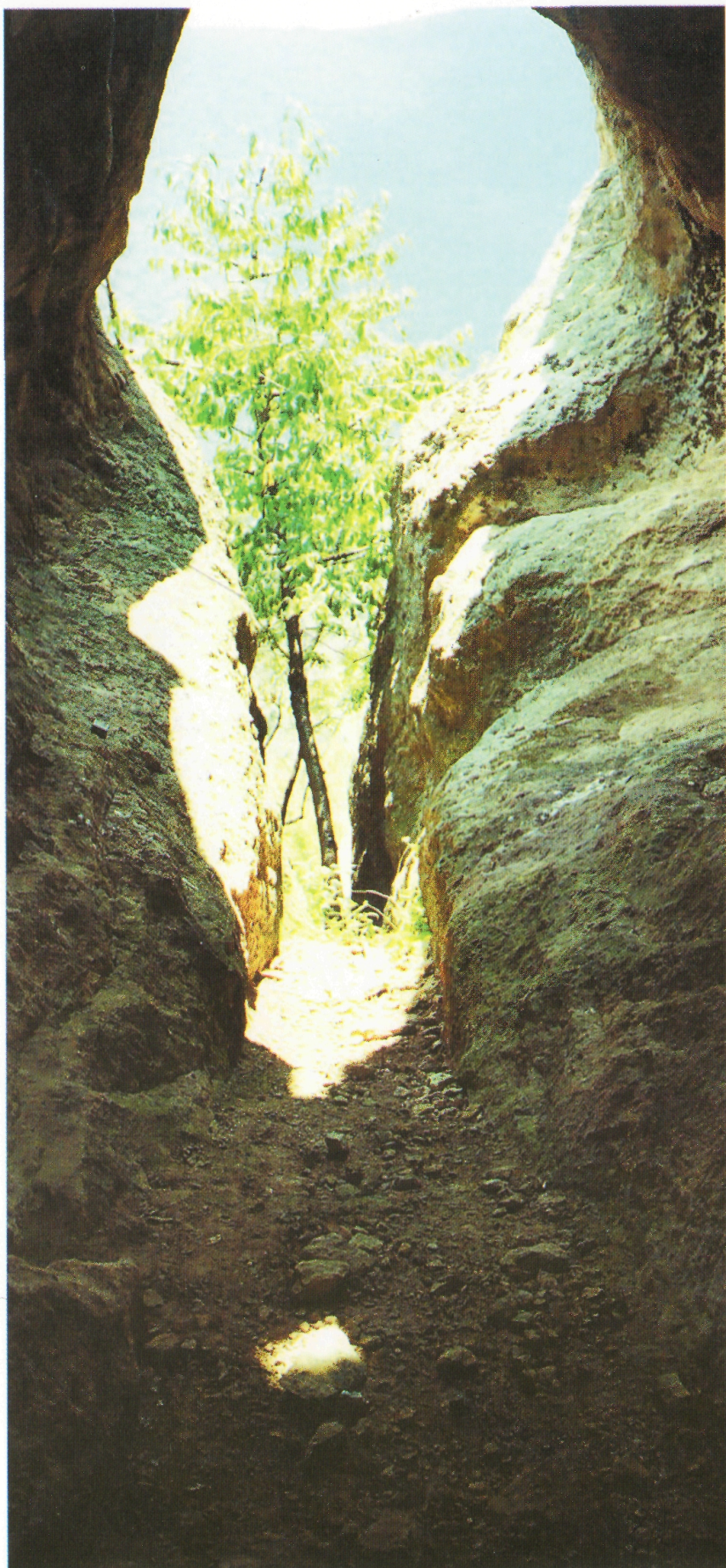
The iron-clad legions advanced towards the Rhodopes led by Lucius Calpurnius Piso, proconsul of Macedonia and personal legate of August. The Bessian armies were forced to retreat from the valley to save their hearths and families. They quickly organized their defense and bravely faced the invaders. They even won the first battle, studding the venerable woods of the great mountain with the dead bodies of the Romans.

But then the most powerful army in the world got the upper hand. Applying their famous tactics "Divide and rule!" the Romans bribed some of the dignitaries and defeated the rest in battle. The Bessians lost the war and Vologez was taken captive. Lucius Piso was awarded with highest honors – triumph in the streets of the Great

Here stood the wooden ladder leading to the Temple of the Great Mother Goddess

City. Together with the survived soldiers, the leader and chief priest of Dionysus was tagged behind the chariot of the victor. The

Romans, however, realized they had to bear in mind the millennial beliefs of the Thracians.



The entrance of the Temple of the Great Mother Goddess



With the feeling of a newborn



The shrine of the legendary singer Orpheus near the village of Tatul

1st century AD

Only some twenty years after the death of the first Roman emperor, in 45 AD Thrace totally became a province of Rome. Perhaps the Italians were impressed by the great fame of the temple of Dionysus in the antique world and the prediction about Octavian August made there. They took great care for its prosperity. In fact, an analogy can be made with the other great oracle in Delphi. After the 5th c. BC its importance drastically

declined, and in the Hellenic era it was practically abandoned. It was the Romans who in the 1st c. restored the ancient temple and its grandeur.

This is valid not only for the hill of Perperikon but the whole vast valley of Arda. The Italians found that the temple of Dionysus was far not the only gigantic rock facility cut out by the toolers of the ancient people. Within tens of kilometers from the river could be seen strange niches hewn into vertical cliffs hundreds of meters high up. On



*The entrance of the
Temple of the Great
Mother Goddess*



The magnificent shrine of Orpheus, which rivals the beautiful Hellenic temples

prominent rocks there were plundered tombs of ancient kings. Abandoned shrines on nearly every peak. They were said to be made in the time of the Trojan War.

Two sacred places created in the dawn of history, however, were particularly significant and the Romans looked after them as they did after Perperikon. These two were only within a few hours walk from the temple of Dionysus and were closely related to it. One was high up in the mountain, at the source of the brook flowing under Perperikon. It is the wonderful Cave-Womb, temple of the

Great Mother Goddess, created millennia ago. The other one was on the other side of Arda river, at the site where many years after would appear the hamlet of Tatul. It is a rock pyramid with a tomb cut out in it, which is known to be the earliest sanctuary of the great singer and prophet Orpheus.

Today a solemn procession is going out from the temple of Dionysus. The month is February and the one-month-long festival of the Great Winter Dionysia has started. This is the time of the annual ceremonial visit of the two nearby temples by the chief priest. We

join the procession and set out along the winding river valley for the temple of the Great Mother Goddess. The procession passes by rock complexes of numerous cut out niches. In them lie little ceramic vessels containing the dust of long gone ancestors.

We reach a high stony plateau. In the ver-

tical rock near the top is the mouth of a cave to which one can climb by a wooden ladder. In front of the ladder we are met by the priests of the Great Mother Goddess and shown in. The feeling is utterly strange, perhaps close to the forgotten feeling of a newborn. Because suddenly we find ourselves in a



huge female womb. The natural cave has been shaped and elongated by the tools of man. In the northern end opposite the entrance there is a carved semicircular altar, symbolizing the uterus of the earth goddess and the source of fertility.

The miracle occurs at noon. Suddenly, from

an invisible slit in the ceiling a sunray penetrates inside and is projected on the floor. It slowly crawls from south to north and becomes a huge light phallus. Finally it enters the altar-uterus reaching monstrous dimensions. Simultaneously an inhuman sound is heard. It is the resonance of the rotund male



The stone pyramid on which the tomb of Orpheus lies and the shrine next to it



*Orpheus' tomb cut out of
the rock*

voices singing the hymns to the almighty Thracian deities. For the ancient people this was the act of nature's reproduction. The Sun God has fertilized the earth and spring will come soon.

We spend the night in the nearby settlement with a sanctuary, where old texts on clay tablets are kept. We have not slept a

wink because the feast has gone on all night. As it is proper for the Dionysia, immeasurable wine was poured till morning. Thick red undiluted wine, to the horror of the neighbors Greeks who mocked the Thracians for not adding water to it. The half-drunk beauties dressed as maenads are dancing in full swing, remaining with less and less clothes on.



Up the mysterious staircase

Finally happens what prompted Herodotus to accuse Thracian girls of looseness and too free morals. But for the Bessians without this festival the year would be bad and lean.

With heavy heads, on the next day we set out for Perperikon. We stay there for two days and then leave for the temple of Orpheus. After several kilometers the procession reach-

es the wide Arda river. Our flat-bottomed boats take us to the other bank and again we enter steep canyons cut by sweeping mountain brooks. Cliffs studded with cut out niches again rise above our heads.

We cross a broad ridge and suddenly a glorious view opens up before us. A vast valley, in the center of which rises a rock heap. From

afar it looks like a human creation, just like the pyramids built by the Egyptians in time immemorial. When we approach, however, it turns out this is a creation of mother nature and man has only intervened in the shaping of the peak.

The peak is cut as a truncated pyramid and a rectangular chamber is hewn out in the top and closed by a stone slab. No one dares look in it. Age-old tradition says that if this happens everything in the surroundings will perish. Everybody knows that relics of Orpheus are kept inside. All Thracian, Greek and Italian cities dream of having remains from the great bard and prophet dismembered at the order of the almighty Dionysus. Such precious acquisition, however, hides a terrible hazard.

Myths have it that once Orpheus' skull was kept in the city of Liberta near the Olympus. The skull was in a tightly closed stone urn on a high pedestal. According to the prophecy, placed between the earth and heaven, even after his death the only man who has come back from the kingdom of the dead will be able to be an intermediary between the people and the gods. However, if the sun should see the relics, Liberta would perish from a swine. The town dwellers thought the prophecy was nonsense. But once someone accidentally knocked down the urn and the skull rolled out of it. The very same night Liberta was destroyed by the swollen river, whose name in Greek means "swine".

So, for more than a millennium now the Thracians from the mountain and the plain had brought gifts and deposited them by the large altar at the foot of the truncated pyramid. They believed the sacred place protected the whole Rhodopes from diseases and natural disasters. Just as once the Holy Mountain





Rock tomb of a Bessian ruler

preserved from the black plague the grave of another famous Rhodope king Rezos, who died from the hand of Odysseus under the walls of Troy.

Many generations developed Orpheus' shrine. The procession climbs to it by white-stone stairs. We enter through a gate in the high stone wall surrounding the sacred court where all sacraments are administered. Only a hundred years ago a magnificent temple has been built, which could rival the best buildings in Hellas. It is visited by Greeks, Italians, Egyptians, by all who honored Orpheus. There the local priests meet the chief servant in the temple of Dionysus. Because it is known that although in his anger he killed the great Rhodope singer, the god chose him of all mortals for his oracle and messenger among men.

The sacraments are administered. The day is declining and the solemn procession starts on its way back to Perperikon. It arrives there after sunset. The darkness gradually envelops the shrines carved in the rocks. In a millennia-old anticipation of the first morning rays.



"The way to the Temple" cut out in the crags, reaching the wall of the Perperikon Palace-Shrine

End of 3rd century AD

Centuries of prosperity have passed. Perperikon has grown, thriving on the thousands of donations brought from distant parts of the great empire. The relatively poor in finds Hellenistic period is superseded in the Roman era by impetuous upsurge. This period

can rightfully be called classical for the fine architecture on the hill and a "golden age" for the Temple of Dionysus. It was then that a whole city was carved out of the rock. Let us take a bird's eye view of the incredible panorama.

The rock garland is protected by a strong fortress, Acropolis, of 2.8 m thick walls. By all



The bronze Roman padlock of the precious toilet chest from Perperikon

probability the stronghold was much older but in the Roman period it was repaired and reinforced. It is amazing how the ancient builders managed to construct it without any bonding. The two faces of the wall are of massive blocks with perfectly finished front side. The inside of the wall was filled up with crushed stone. The Acropolis and the spacious quarters

to the north and south on the slopes were built up with numerous religious and secular buildings. What is unique about them is that their entire ground floors are carved in the rocks. Although a significant part of the quarters has not yet been unearthed by archaeologists, at places today's visitor can walk down broad streets cut in the rock and step into

well-preserved buildings and stately ensembles through original doors with cut stone sills, bearing the holes for the door-posts. As if the inhabitants of Perperikon have left not long ago.

Latest research revealed evidence of very high level of building culture and life standard. Carved in the rock in the eastern part of the acropolis is a large basilica-planned temple. At the western end, two monumental stone portals preserve the holes for what must have been folding doors. A portico leads from the basilica into the heart of the acropolis, its columns still in place. It is known from antique and medieval authors that such porticos were built only in the big cities and in cult complexes. The inhabitants could walk down these passages unexposed to the sun or rain. It is an incredible feeling to see such architectural achievement on the top of a mountain.

Now let us go out through the southern gateway of the Acropolis, also hewn out in the rock and built by solid stone blocks. Some thirty meters below we find ourselves before a grand palace as if from a fairytale. The dozens of rooms on the ground floor are of total area 10,000 sq m. They are all preserved and at places reach a height of 4-5 m. The reason is simple – the entire ground floor is carved in the rock. Hundreds of thousands of cubic meters of stone have been taken out – labor comparable to the building of the

Egyptian pyramids. This was done with precise calculation of the premises, whose walls are chiseled perfectly vertical. The palace comprises several corpuses at seven levels with total displacement of 30 m. Upwards it



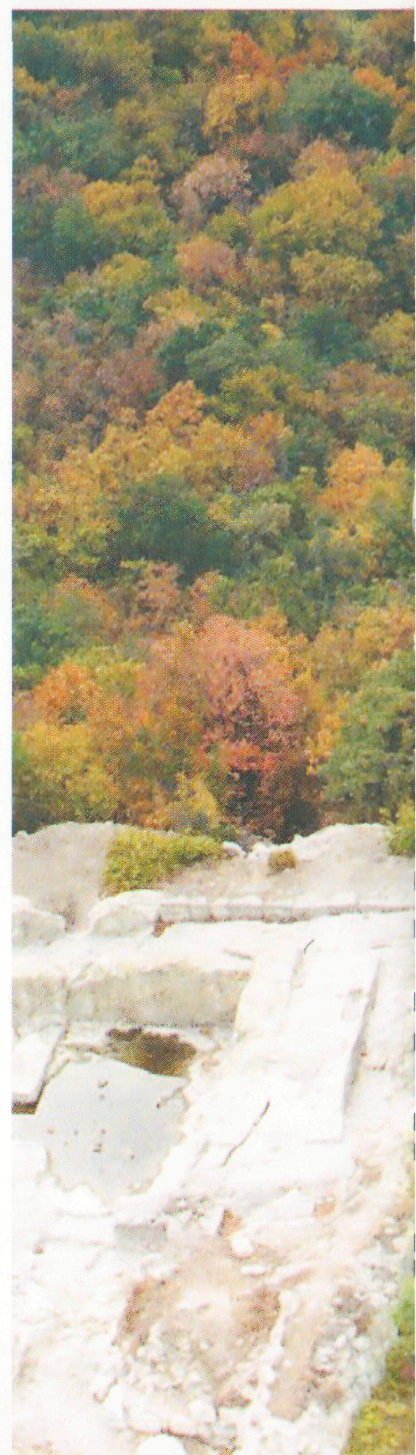
*The incredible view of
the Palace-Shrine
from the Acropolis*

unfolded in several stories, from which the holes for the beams can be seen in the surrounding rocks. At two places the sills of upper-floor doors are preserved. Vertically the rock continued in solid stone walls and timber joists made of such large trees that no longer exist in the Rhodope Mountains.

But the ground floor in itself is sufficient to convince us of the size of the colossal construction. The main approach to the



*A rock-carved street
in the Acropolis at
Perperikon*



grandiose ensemble is from the south. If we climb the southern slopes of the hill, we will unexpectedly find ourselves in a rock passage about 100 m long. This is a natural defile, broadened and shaped by human hand. It is 3-4 m wide, its height reaching up to 7-8 m. The climb is steep, the rock is roughly terraced in tall steps. It is indeed a classical example of "the way to the Temple".

Tired and breathless, at the end of the pas-

sage we stand before a strong fortified wall. This is the wall of the palace, built in the same way as that of the Acropolis and connected to it. The entrance into the complex is through two consecutive two-leaved gates, whose sills are excellently preserved to date. Finally we enter the palace and find ourselves in a spacious courtyard.

On the west and east it is lined with dozens of premises – halls, rooms, corridors.

The Acropolis at Perperikon





The ceremonial hall of the Palace-Shrine

Meticulously cut stairs lead to them and there are some wholly preserved doors cut out in the rock. All floors were covered by brick tiles. There are several preserved windows cut out in the crags, which command a wonderful view of the river valley.

East of the courtyard is the more than 30 m long ceremonial hall of the palace. Its west-

ern side is entirely hewn in the rock, and to the east it extended on trimmer joists resting on massive stone walls, which are not preserved. The western part, however, is completely preserved. One steps with excitement on the solemn five-stair staircase and through the folding door once guarded by the palace guards.



In the extreme western and eastern sections of the complex, deep in the rocks, two crypts are found. One contains 5 and the other 15 sarcophaguses, finely built of stone slabs. Unfortunately, these have been robbed in antiquity and today we can only guess who was buried there, members of a ruling dynasty or priests who served in the temple

complexes on the hill.

We can only make conjectures about the purpose of many details in the palace. On the northern wall of the courtyard a throne is cut out of the stone with armrests and footrest. At many places in the rocks niches of various size and beds for some kind of shelves are carved. The southwest room we provisionally called "the bathroom" because shallow basins alternating with benches are cut out in the stone. Particularly interesting is the bed for a huge pulley carved in the basement under the ceremonial hall. Perhaps it was a joist whereby food, wine and other things were lifted up.

What was this colossal ensemble? It is not accidental that the open oval hall with the round altar is situated in the northwestern part of the complex. This hall functioned until the adoption of Christianity. In the late period it was accessed though a stately entrance with a folding door. Inside there were monumental columns, of which only insignificant parts have survived.

In fact, we hardly need to oppose the terms "palace" and "temple". It is clear that the Thracian ruler was also high priest of his people. Where his residence stood, there would also be the chief temple. We believe that the heroic march of Vologez against the Odrysae in the valley started from Perperikon. So, perhaps the best term for the monumental complex is Palace-Shrine, proposed by some archaeologists.

Unfortunately, there are practically no written records about the Thracian royal residences. One lucky exception is the account of the famous Athenian general and historian Xenophon, who lived in the 5th-4th century BC. He wrote about the fortified palace of King Sevt II, calling it "tursis". In the palace

there were barracks, farming and representative buildings, as well as the chief temples. In the center was the large reception hall of the Thracian kings, where everyone had to leave his arms in the anteroom.

This description literally illustrates the functions of the Palace-Shrine of Perperikon. Only that its building began much earlier, at the close of the Bronze Age. Through the multiple reconstructions of the complex transpires the ancient planning of the megaron. Translated from Greek this term means "big hall". As architecture it emerged in the Crete-Mycenean world. With Homer this was the reception hall of the royal palaces since the time of the Trojan War. The megarons found today in Crete, Troy and in Mycenean Greece represent great halls with an anteroom leading to the indispensable courtyard. The cities

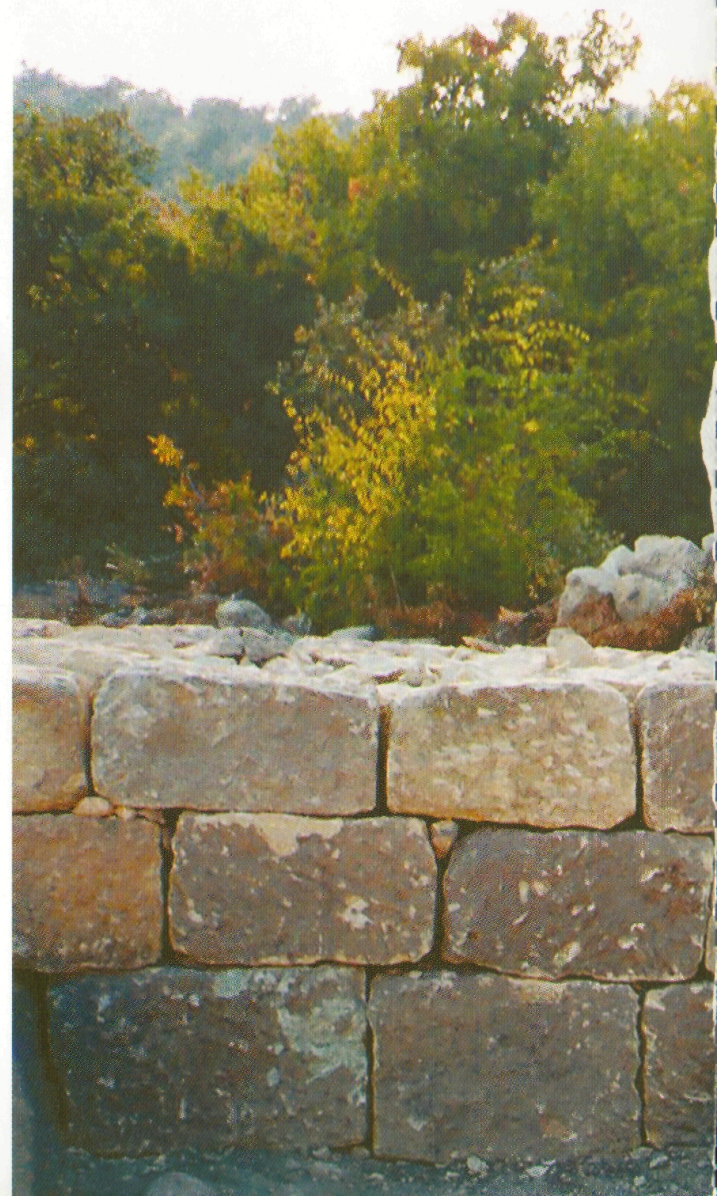
of this epoch were fortified eagle's nests at inaccessible heights. Everything points to the fact that the palace at Perperikon was a Thracian replica of such architectural creations.

The incredible engineering skills of the ancient architects are evident in the drainage system. Its construction began millennia ago and found its finished form in the Roman period. Under the brick flooring of every room gutters were cut to drain rainwater. They ran through special openings in the doorsills and led to large drainage facilities. At many places shafts are cut with manholes for cleaning the leaves and dirt. Finally the gutters drain in several large sewers which take the rainwater out through holes in the fortified walls and down the side of the hill. Such facilities are found both in



Roman solid silver ring with inlaid carnel gemma depicting Helios on a chariot, riding in heaven (the environs of Perperikon)

One goes through the portal of the Palace-Shrine with excitement



the palace and in the Acropolis.

The builders have also thought of the supply of drinking water. There is reason to believe there existed a water-main. Some two kilometers away from Perperikon an ancient fountain was discovered, where the water was fed by clay pipes. From a metal spout on a carved-stone base the water poured in three communicating stone troughs.

Water supply was a problem for the high places in any mountain fortress. The solution was vast cisterns, built or cut out of the rock. Until now two such cisterns have been found at Perperikon, which are the largest water-retention facilities in the Rhodopes. Like the buildings, they are cut into the rock and have perfectly chiseled walls.

The Romans brought to the hill their refined and haute lifestyle. Many fragments

of fine red-varnished and printed pottery are found. The multitude of 1st-4th century coins speaks of intensive trade. There are luxurious objects such as silver mirrors and vessels, unique padlocks for toilet chests with anthropomorphic masks, fibulae and rings, bronze plates with the images of Hermes, Heracles and other ancient gods. The upsurge was great but no one supposed it would be short lived.



August 378 AD

Turbulent times came for the powerful and unshakable Roman Empire. For decades the barbarians had been devastating its once inviolable territories. The strongly fortified borders still withheld them but a strange insecurity hovered in the air. The Christian religion imposed by Emperor Constantine divided the empire subjects, many of whom remained pagan. In the Rhodopes, on the other hand, they had heard little of the new doctrine and were hostile to it. When the other Thracian tribes had long been assimilated by the numerous peoples of the boundless state, the Bessians still preserved the religion of their ancestors and guarded the Temple of Dionysus. Many who cherished the preservation of the old faith joined them.

Anyway, news reached them that a new and horrid barbarian tribe raged to the south of the great Danube river. The Goths came pressed by the countless Huns. Emperor Valent tried to settle and civilize them but without success. The power was seized by the cruel Fritigern, who led his squads to the heart of the empire – the capital of Constantinople. The mountain dwellers, however, were still unaware that the Gothic leader had humiliated the Emperor by claiming the whole of Thrace. Naturally, Valent did not accept the ultimatum and led his army against the barbarians. On August 9, 378, at Adrianople the Roman legions were mercilessly slaughtered and the emperor killed.

From the high towers of the Acropolis the guards saw a wall of smoke moving south-eastwards. As if a drum of fire and smoke was rolling towards the rock hill. The villages in the river valley were burning and crowds of terrified men, women and children ran to the



Bronze buckle from the time of the barbarian invasions

fortress gates, crying feverishly, "The Goths, the Goths are coming!"

The defense was hastily organized, because in the clouds of dust the first riders of the Goths' cavalry already appeared. They attacked on the move, without any plan. In a wild and fierce impulse, they climbed the fortress walls, they fell, died, but others replaced them. The small garrison was spent and the invaders got inside.

Wounded soldiers, priests and common people tried to defend the millennia-old Temple of Dionysus, but in vain. The Goths knew it kept the treasures piled for centuries by innumerable worshipers. They burst into the oval hall, where on the altar stood the high priest. Some barbarian's sword cut his head and his blood mixed with the wine spilt from the goblet he was holding. On the ritual platform,

roaring in laughter barbarians abused the oracle of Dionysus before the underground deity took her soul.

The temple burnt in raging flames. The Acropolis and the outer town were on fire. A shroud of smoke covered the rocky peak and merged with the smoke from the valley. This fire burnt the ancient myths and new times came.

The middle of the 6th century

150 years have passed since the Goths' devastation. We left the rocky peak in ruins, flames and smoke that seemed to be the end of it. What is our surprise when we see that the stone city has been reconstructed more

glorious than before. The buildings of the Acropolis, the palaces and the quarters are restored and new ones built. The barbarians' invasions have taught the inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire to build strong fortifications using the natural relief. New walls rise on the remains of the antique ones, not so thick but made of quarry stone bonded by plaster as strong as modern concrete.

Details from the late antique and early-Byzantine Perperikon



The fortified city became an important center of civil power. Its heyday was during the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565), who set himself the ambitious task of restoring the Roman Empire within its previous boundaries and almost succeeded. Abundant ceramics, gold, silver and bronze coins, jewelry, fragments of a gold patrician diadem are evidence of the flourish of the stone city in that time. This was the state of the mil-

lennia-old settlement at the threshold of the Middle Ages.

The observant eye, however, would discern important differences. Indeed, the pagan shrine in the Acropolis was overhauled and its white stone blocks could be seen from afar. But to the east a solid semicircular structure had been added, pointing directly to the old-time Sun God. And above the new altar, on the roof of the building shone a



Bronze Christian relic-chests in the form of crosses

large golden cross. A close look at the temple façade shows dozens of architectural details in which the symbol of the new faith is carved. The Rhodopes have adopted Christianity.

At the highest point of the Acropolis stands a newly built majestic church. It is obviously the Episcopal cathedral of harmonious proportions. Its construction, however, is like that of the old buildings from pagan times,

with well-shaped blocks and no masonry. A visitor naturally wonders how this beautiful building came into being. Its fate involved events of historical as well as purely human nature. Let us delve in the depths of time again...

The year is 398 and we are walking in the stone-paved streets of the Italian city of Nola. We come to the little square in front of the large cathedral, where many people have

The heathen shrine in the Acropolis, converted by the Christians into a church



gathered. We make our way through the crowd and see an old man with floating white hair and long beard dressed in Episcopal attire. Next to him stands the young bishop of Nola Paulinus, looking enthusiastically in the eyes of the old man who is telling his strange story. Paulinus does not know yet that, inspired by this account, he would write down this life story and thus the coming generations would learn of the exploits of a great Christian missionary.

The old man was Niketa of Remesiana, who was later appointed bishop of Trajanupolis, an Aegean city less than a hundred kilometers away from Perperikon. The Universal Patriarch in Constantinople assigned him the hard task of converting the heathens in the Rhodopes. The mission started in 393, when Niketa and a few followers got to the recess-

es of the Holy Mount. Wandering through the impenetrable oak forests, the group reached the ruins of Perperikon. The rock city, burnt down fifteen years ago by the barbarians, was demolished but some people moved among the ruins. They had restored only the Temple of Dionysus, where on the millennia-old altar his priests officiated.

As elsewhere in Europe, Bishop Niketa decided to eradicate paganism first at the chief shrine of the old faith. However, this proved a hard task. More than one Christian missions had set out for the Holy Mountain but never returned. Therefore the Bessians were called "bloodthirsty villains" by many. Their age-old trade was also recalled – the extraction of virgin gold, which they burrowed with their hands from the earth's womb.

The symbol of the new faith on stone details from the early church at Perperikon





Part of the monumental decoration of the early church at Perperikon

Bishop Niketa had the gift to convince. After a while, the mountain dwellers listened to his accounts about the Man-God, who sacrificed his life for the other people. This was so different from their idea of the Thracian Dionysus, Zagreus the somber underground ruler, the domineering Great Mother Goddess living in the Cave-Womb, the legendary singer and oracle Orpheus who rambled through the forest clearings and the steep rocks together with his companions.

But the Bishop baptist went further. He obtained a special permission from Constantinople to translate the holy books into the language of the Bessians so that Christ's word would more easily get to their hearts. This was tantamount to blasphemy, because these texts were to be written only in the sacred languages – Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Such exception had only been made once in 340 AD when, in order to appease the barbarians in their endless attacks on the Empire, Wulfila, the Bishop of the Goths, was allowed to translate the Bible in their language.

We have every reason to believe that this

happened at Perperikon. Namely near the magnificent church high up in the Acropolis. It was doubtlessly an Episcopal cathedral, which is evident from its size and the stone benches in the altar. Such seats existed only in the prelatric temples and only guest bishops were entitled to sit in them. A lucky accident let archaeologists learn the exact date the cathedral was built. A small bronze coin had been dropped between two blocks in the wall. It has no numismatic value but it is precious for history. The coin is of the last Emperor of the Western Roman Empire Honorius (393-425) and precisely dates the construction of the church. The time coincides with the mission of Bishop Niketa of Remesiana.

The fate of the ancient Temple of Dionysus was unenviable. To delete even the memory of it, the missionaries buried the hall with the altar under several meters of earth. Inside they buried large earthen jars where wine, olives and olive oil were kept. Thus the shrine known across the Mediterranean was turned into an ordinary storehouse.

Sometime in the 7th century AD

New barbarian horsemen ride at the foot of the hill. This time, however, they are friendly and come in peace. The Emperor has recently settled the Bulgarians in the surroundings of the big city of Thessalonica and they are discovering the beauties of the Rhodopes. The Bulgarians honored austere rocks even in their Asian land of origin. And now they heard of the rock mount, where for millennia the stone was held in reverence.

Together with a few other men, the leader Kuber went up the steep stairs cut in the rocks. In the fortress there was a small Byzantine garrison because every fit man was at the capital of Constantinople, which the

Arab general Moavius sieges for several years. Once again the Eastern Roman Empire is shaken by enemy attacks and nobody knows whether it would survive.

Curious Bulgarians look with amazement around the ancient ruins and the beautiful new churches. They stop before the abandoned altars and the buildings carved out of the rock. Their purpose is a mystery but the shadows of long dead priests and worshipers seem to hover over them. It was not the first time the Bulgarians came across the last remnants of great civilizations. On their long way to the West they crossed many lands that had been possessed by now decayed empires.

The Bulgarians are not yet Christian. They honor the heavenly god Tangra, the Mother Goddess Umai and their idiosyncratic Holy



*Gold-plated silver key to
the treasury of medieval
Perperikon*



*Figure of the
proto-Bulgarian
goddess of fertility
Umai on a
rock in
Perperikon*

Spirit – Yer-Su, a faceless deity connecting Heaven and Earth. Like the sanctuaries of the ancient Thracians, their heathen shrines were made near rocks and stone heaps. The Bulgarians often scratched drawings of their gods and their symbols on stone.

The mysterious energy of the rocky peak made the barbarians do the same here. For some reason they associated the hill with the Woman Goddess Umai. In their concepts she was patron of the chieftain and mother of the whole Universe. Umai protects the greatest moment of the cosmos – birth. Therefore she was often represented as genitals, which is also the direct translation of her name from Turkic.

Soon the rocks were covered with incised drawings of the symbol of the Mother

Goddess and “draughts”, which for them represented the cardinal points and a miniature plan of the heathen shrine. On the highest cliff someone depicted Umai in a splendid dress, with halo and a bow in her right hand.

Kuber’s subjects were only part of the large tribe of the Bulgarians. Their “Great Bulgaria”, founded hundreds of years ago on the northern coast of the Black Sea, had just fallen apart under the blows of the Hazars. Another major part of the Bulgarian people, led by Khan Asparuh, was now at war with Byzantium for the lands south of the Danube. There again the Bulgarians would find majestic rocks once worshiped by the Thracians. The stone massif of Madara would become chief cult center of the new population of the Balkan Peninsula.



Medieval iron keys to the buildings in Perperikon



Original wall-paintings discovered in a chapel at the St. John Prodromus Cathedral

1086 AD

The messenger of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus is riding amain on the dust roads of the Rhodopes. Having left Constantinople a couple of days ago, he has to reach the regional center of Achridos, as the Eastern Rhodopes were called in the Middle Ages, as soon as possible. His mission was to deliver the scroll of an order affixed with the lead seal of the Emperor's secret adviser, asicrit.

Let us look at the contents of the scroll using the possibilities of the people of the future. It says that development of the mines, abandoned in ancient times, near the rock peak fortress must start immediately.

Recently commissioned miners reported to the vasilevs that the gold deposits were far from exhausted. The Empire badly needed the precious metal. Forthcoming was the minting of a new gold coin, which would enhance the economy and finances of Byzantium. Alexius had even thought of a name for the coin: "hyperperon" or "perpera".

At last, the messenger reaches the regional center. It is a wonderful estate, set up about a hundred years ago by the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, Emperor Basilus I. As there was no large city in the Eastern Rhodopes, the religious and secular institutions were based in two such estates. The chief church center was in the St. John

Prodromus Monastery, in present-day Kardjali. The administration was accommodated by the brook under the rock peak. Many buildings were constructed on the terrace with stairways leading to them. To one side rose a beautiful church with a gold-plated dome. They said inside the church was entirely covered with marble and painted-ceramics decoration. The flooring was of variegated cement, resembling a glade with blooming flowers.

The luxury and refinement were not accidental, because the region of Achridos had of old enjoyed special status in the Empire. It could not be otherwise as this land was the personal possession of the vasillevs. From this

land his administrators granted estates to churches, monasteries and eminent aristocrats. In the regional center there was an important building, where the archives of complaints and imperial orders were kept. Their lead seals bore the names of highest dignitaries in the empire – dukes, protospatarians, bishops, generals. The letter from the asicrit also went there after the archon read it and registered it.

Within a month the exploitation of the mines was in full swing. Thousands of people from the whole Rhodope Mountains were recruited. Pickaxes and hack-hammers broadened and extended the galleries made by the Bessians. The courses became kilometers long



Gold-plated silver amulet with protective prayer against diseases, discovered on the chest of a 10-year-old boy in the necropolis of Perperikon



The medieval ladies wore numerous bronze bracelets

and formed a kind of an underground town. The rock mass was taken out by pulleys along vertical shafts, serving also as vents of the mines. Then, by the river the rock mass was crushed and cradled. Once in a while, among the sand grains glittered tiny pieces of virgin gold.

The gold was abundant and the regional governor was satisfied. Loads of gold were sent to Constantinople. Emperor Alexius was also happy and soon a coin bearing his image appeared. The vasilivs ordered that the rock city be called Hyperperakion in honor of the new coin. In their writings, however, chroniclers soon abbreviated the name to

Perperakion or simply Perperikon. This is the name by which today we know the ancient city, which and it has survived in the written sources.

This is one of the possible origins of the name of the ancient hill. In the veiled by oblivion past, however, there are always other hypotheses. If this is how they called the rock peak in the 11th century, how was it called before? Looking for the truth, philologists found that the word "hyperperos" does not occur in the Byzantine Greek language. On the other hand, it is part of the vocabulary of Aristotle and is related to sacrifices in the antique temples. The word is hard to

translate and it broadly means “superfiry”.

This takes us back to the ancient rites performed in the Temple of Dionysus. What if the Eastern Roman Empire, jealously guarding its antique heritage, preserved the legend of the ancient shrine? And perhaps it was always called Hyperperakion? If this is the case, the lover of ancient history Emperor Alexius I Comnenus maybe called his new gold coin after the ancient city, where he mined so much of the precious metal. History leaves us guessing until the discovery of further archaeological evidence.



A gold coin with the image of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus from Perperikon



Lead seals of high Byzantine dignitaries from Perperikon



Fine medieval ceramics for the interior decoration of a temple in Perperikon

1343 AD

The rivalry between the two largest states on the Balkans, Byzantium and Bulgaria, has been going on for centuries. It has had its ups and downs. During the reign of the great Bulgarian Tsar Simeon the Eastern Roman Empire was almost subjugated, and a century later the Bulgarians lost their independence, conquered by one of the greatest

Byzantine vassals, Basil II. After the liberation of the Slav people in 1185, however, the intolerance between the two Orthodox states had gone. Their subjects became ever more aware of being part of a single Eastern-Christian community. Still there were many military conflicts but they were not life-and-death. Often the rivals fought for a long time with small squads for a little district or even a city.

This is exactly what happened in the 1340s. In 1341 once again an intestine war broke out in Byzantium for the imperial throne. Taking advantage of the young age of the minor vasilevs John V Paleologus, the wealthy Aegean landowner John Kantakuzin waged a war for the throne. However, the regent mother Anna of Savoy did not surrender and gathered faithful men on her side. The civil war was long and exhausting. Most of the time it was led in the territory of the Eastern Rhodopes and outside the Aegean cities. Soon Byzantium's neighbors intervened to their own profit.

The Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander also saw his chance. The Tarnovo rulers had long wanted to recover the southern regions lost during the reign of the unlucky successors of the great Ivan Asen II. With clever diplomatic maneuvers and without any military operations Ivan Alexander regained Plovdiv and Stanimaka (present-day Asenovgrad). But this

only wetted his appetite and in 1343 he decided to launch a campaign to seize the Eastern Rhodopes. This was an old aspiration of the Bulgarian tsars and it was not the first time they tried to restore their rule there. In 1254 Tsar Mihail Asen conquered all fortresses except the regional center Mneacos but was ultimately forced to retreat.

Now the region of Achridos was in the possession of the pretender John Kantakuzin and his proxy was Joan Asen. As his name indicates, he was of Bulgarian descent. He was a descendant of Tsar Ivan Asen III, who after the Uprising of Ivailo fled to Byzantium and started the famous Bulgarian-Byzantine family. His grandson Joan Asen was an outright follower of John Kantakuzin and when the latter at the end of the war became Emperor conferred on him the highest title, despot.

In 1343 the civil war was in its height. The pretender to the throne tried to make peace with Tsar Ivan Alexander, but the latter did



Tableware ceramics from Perperikon

not even answer the messengers. Here is how John Kantakuzin, who towards the end of his life became a monk and wrote his memoirs, described the events that followed:

“Alexander came with his army to Mora [another name of Achridos, author’s note] to seize, if he can, the fortresses there, which were subordinated to the Emperor. One of them, called Hyperperakion, even before Alexander’s arrival had accepted the archon he sent. They would also receive a garrison. When the Emperor learned this news from the messengers, he left his son Matey as chief of Gracianople and the other cities subordinated to him in Chalcidice and in great haste set out for Mora against the Moesians [Bulgarians, author’s note]. Realizing he could not engage in open battle, Alexander swiftly crossed Hebros [Maritsa, author’s note] in a disorderly and unorganized manner and put up a camp there, trusting that the river would stop the Emperor from waging battle on them. In crossing the river few soldiers died but many horses and transport was lost not only due to the current but also because the soldiers the Emperor had placed in the front ranks attacked the Moesians while they were still crossing the river. The Emperor regained Hyperperakion and the archon appointed by Alexander fled at the news of the Emperor’s coming.”

This episode can well be called “war for Perperikon” between Bulgaria and Byzantium. The rich city was the main target of Tsar Ivan Alexander. It is little wonder, bearing in mind the city’s prosperity. A letter from the Ecumenical Patriarch of June 1339 obliged the bishop of Perperikon to pay an annual pension to the metropolitan of the large seaside city of Philipi.

This is why the Bulgarian tsar chose

Perperikon to appoint his archon, a title meaning not only chief of the fortress but also governor of the region. This is how we got the only gold seal-chrysobule of this ruler, which survived the centuries. Obviously, it was affixed to an important letter sent to the archon. What were the letter contents? Did the tsar order an attack on the Byzantine cities or did he want the gold mines to be developed, for which perhaps the whole war was waged?



An onyx seal with the image of St Michael the Archangel from Perperikon



*The wall of the
medieval citadel of
Perperikon*

1362 AD

Anyway, Perperikon did not remain Byzantine for long. The pretenders to the Byzantine throne extensively used mercenary Turkish detachments, recruited mainly among the subjects of Emir Umur of Aydin, a cruel and merciless Mediterranean pirate. Excellent warriors, the Aydiners often went out of control. Thus they burnt down and plundered many of the Achridos fortresses. As the monk

John Kantakuzin sadly noted, “we lost those who we had set out to liberate”. Perperikon survived the internecine war, but only in a few years terrible times came again.

In the 1230s in the distant lands of Anatolia a small group of nomads had appeared, numbering some thousands of tents. This was the Turk tribe Kays, pushed out from Middle Asia by the invasion of the Mongols. Their emir was the ambitious Ertogrul, who started raiding the neighboring



14th century vessels from Perperikon

Byzantine territories. The first big victories, however, were won by his successor Osman, who would be called Gazi (Conqueror) and who would lay the foundations of a great empire. He came to power as the head of a small nomad tribe, but by the time of his death in 1326 he had conquered nearly all Asia Minor. In 1354 his son Murad crossed the Dardanelles and seized the large fortress of Galipoli on the European side, which would become a springboard for the advance of the Ottoman armies on the Balkan Peninsula.

The hot summer of 1362 was at its height. The Maritsa river was almost dry, even here in its lower reaches. At the high hill by the river rose the walls of the large city of Dimotica, for which the Bulgarian tsars

fought for centuries with Byzantium. However, different flags were now flown above the walls, neither Bulgarian nor Byzantine, but green with a yellow crescent. The Ottoman army had just taken the stronghold and it would be capital of their state for a couple of years.

Faithful to their strategy of "blitz war", for which no European people was ready, the Turks lost no time and sent out a heavily armed detachment to the north. The Rhodopes were near and beyond the low peaks they knew the fertile and vibrant with life valley of Arda river lied. They had heard about it and the handsome fortresses of Achridos from Aydin pirates, who had brought countless treasures from there.

The detachment sneaked through the narrow gorge of Byala Reka, from where no one in the interior expected an attack. The strong fortresses of Lyutitsa and Gugutka were taken on the march as their garrisons were absolutely unprepared. After twenty-four hours the troops were in the river valley of Borovitsa, which several kilometers further down flowed into Arda. And it was there that the walls of the inaccessible Moniac, the regional center of Achridos, rose.

In August 1206 the architecture of this beautiful castle amazed the French crusaders

from the Fourth Crusade. They learned that here Emperor Baldwin, taken captive by the Bulgarians in the battle at Edirne, was executed, and here his brother Henrich was elected king. Now, however, the not many defenders of the strong fortress were taken by surprise and put up almost no resistance to the invaders.

Then followed the drama, which chroniclers would often describe in the coming decades, repeating each other. As the Mount Athos monk Isai wrote in 1371: "... The Turks dispersed and flew across the land like birds in

The place where the Turkish invaders penetrated the citadel of Perperikon



the air. Some Christians were slain, others taken captive, while those who remained were overtaken by a sorrowful fate – they died of starvation.” One after the other fell the fortresses of Ustra, Efraim, Krivus and Patmos. The peaceful villages by the river of Arda burned, the wonderful monastery of St. John Prodromus was plundered and destroyed by fire.

And again barbarians stood in front of the walls of the great Perperikon. It had gathered the population of the strongholds and villages in the surroundings, which had already passed into the hands of the invaders. The first assault was unsuccessful and the Turks besieged the city. The defenders fought bravely and undertook successful attacks outside the fortress. But there came the terror of any mountain fortress – the shortage of water. The summer was incredibly hot and the reserves in the large cisterns were running out. An epidemic broke out and took the life of many people.

The Ottomans took advantage of the thin defense and one night they succeeded in climbing over the city wall and opening the northern gate. Wild massacre, raping of women and plunder followed. The last defenders, however, had not surrendered yet. They had closed themselves up in the inner citadel, built at the hilltop. There they put up a last rebuff and lost their lives for their faith and homeland.

Hundreds of years later archaeologists would have the rare chance of discovering the place where the invaders penetrated the citadel and the last battle for Perperikon was fought. There, within a very little space, by means of a metal detector were found hundreds of remnants of arms: arrows, pieces of swords and yatagans, whole maces, knives,

spear gads, mechanism for straining arbalests. The Turks assaulted the wall just between the gate and the turret.

We can imagine the fierce rush of the attackers and the doomed determination of the defenders. We can almost hear the clank of broken steel and the roaring cries of the fighting warriors. The Turks prop up a tall ladder on the wall and climb it. The first one goes over the pinnacle and slays with his yatagan the head of one of the defenders. He falls down from the wall covering with his body the quiver full of arrows. Later he would be buried but in the bustle no one would notice the scattered arrows, whose iron gads would be found many years after.

Fate was not gracious to the victorious conqueror either. He has lifted his weapon and loudly praises Allah, when an arrow whizzes and hits his throat. His body sways in the air and falls down at the foot of the turret. In this instant part of it collapses under the blows of the rams and buries the Ottoman conqueror under the ruins. This is the way archaeologists found him centuries later, bent sideways in an unnatural posture, with arms stretched and broken legs.

The Holy City was in flames again. This time it seemed forever. The destroyed fortresses of Achridos sank in oblivion. Earth slowly piled on the millennia-old ruins of Perperikon and a forest sprouted on it. The walls were buried in greenery, the remnants of the buildings cut out in the rocks were overgrown with bushes and trees. As if to show how transitory is everything and how perishable is man.

The end of the 17th century

Not far from the long abandoned ruins, at the foot of the hill there was bustling life until days ago. The defenders of Perperikon who survived the Ottoman invasion 300 years back had founded a hamlet there and their descendants were engaged in animal breeding and

the age-old secrets of vine-growing. Turkish registers unambiguously show that to date they had preserved the faith of their ancestors, Christianity.

However, parting time came. The aggression of the Ottoman Empire, which had gone on for centuries, was finally stopped. In 1571 at Lepanto its navy was defeated by the joint efforts of the Christians, followed by



Despite the vicissitudes of history, Christ still reigns over the Holy Mount



The symbolical tomb of Hazir Baba

defeats on land. Deprived of the possibility to conquer new lands, the Turks lost their main source of enrichment, as their only trade was warfare. The discontent in the many-strong armies grew, the country was on the brink of anarchy, and this undermined the foundations of the once powerful empire.

Then the hatred was turned on the Christian subjects of the Sultan. There were rumors of mass conversion to Mohammedanism, made by enraged warriors coming back from unsuccessful marches to the north. Much of the hearsay was greatly exaggerated, but the eyes of fear are large. Unscrupulous administrators took advantage of the situation and enhanced the pillage of the already heavily levied Christian population. On the other hand, from Asia came Muslims attracted by the good living conditions. As before, the Eastern Rhodopes was one of the best places for habitation. It was not in vain the invaders called it Sultan Eri, which was an echo of its special status in the Byzantine Empire.

The inhabitants of the Christian villages decided they would no longer put up with the outrages of the administrators and would not wait for the bashi-bazouk hordes. They left the lands of their ancestors and set out with all their belongings for quieter places. This is also what the inhabitants of the hamlet under Perperikon did. History does not tell us whether they found peace and what happened to the descendants of the priests of Dionysus.

The fertile valley of the Perpereshka River did not remain uninhabited for long. Soon new caravans winded along the dusty roads. The newly arriving Muslims settled near the



A Revival Period house in the Eastern Rhodopes

abandoned houses of the Christian hamlet. Their faith, however, was not like that of most Turks. They worshiped most of all Mohamed's son-in-law Ali. Hence the name of the sect – Alevites or Kazilbashi (red-heads). Their morals were much freer than those of the other Muslims, the women wore no veils, and they worshiped a saint of theirs – Hazir Baba, whose symbolic tomb was erected at the outskirts of the village.

They called their settlement Karalar, and in the 20th century it would be renamed Gorna Krepost (Upper Fortress). Today it is hard to tell whether the first Muslim settlers

knew anything about the ancient past of the hill towering above their houses. These people knew the cistern cut out in the rock in the fortress and called it Soluk kousu (Leeches' Well). As the name indicates, leeches bred there, which were put on the lips and tendons to drain the bad blood of the sick. Their power was great because the place was holy. The ancient holes in the rock were called Peygamber izi (the Saint's footprints). This saint, not known by name, rode on a giant horse, whose hind legs stood at the site of the Palace-Shrine and his front legs at the Acropolis.

Who is this mysterious saint? Is he the ancient Sun God, worshiped here in antiquity? Or the Thracian Dionysus, whose oracle is cut out in the rocks? Or perhaps one of the Christian mounted saints, such as St. George? Or the Muslim Hazir Baba? Maybe all these

The beginning of the 21st century

Indeed man is perishable and his time on the planet Earth is insignificant, but man's deeds can live eternally. It is not in vain that a 14th century man of letters remarked about what was committed to paper: "The hands of the one who writes will rot and be reduced to dust but the written word, even though crude, is the word of God and will remain forever!" In this sense the discovery of an unknown medieval manuscript could be called revival of its author.

The work of archaeologists is the same with regard to architecture and art. I will never forget the year 1978 when as a budding archaeologist I was discovering the medieval church in the Kokalyanski Urvich fortress near Sofia. It turned out that under the fallen walls of the temple lay tens of thousands of shreds from the magnificent monumental paintings. Instrument work was stopped immediately and for a whole month the fragments were carefully collected by hand. Ultimately a dozen wonderful 14th century human images emerged. Thus contemporary people got an idea of the work of an unknown talented artist who lived 700 years ago. Nothing however compares to the uncovering of Perperikon...

put together. Because no matter how we divide ourselves in peoples and religions, people are alike. And their history is ultimately one, formed by the historical events that occurred during the centuries and little human dramas.

August 21, 2000. In the last year of the second millennium, after Christmas I was leading a small group of students towards the overgrown by bushes and low trees steep hill of Perperikon. From local people we knew this was a Kale (fortress) or Asar (city) from the time of the jenevizes as the Turks called all previous Christian inhabitants. Evidently, despite the break off of tradition, the human generic memory retained a vague reminiscence of what happened here.

Other archaeologists before me had been interested in the ruins on the summit. Even though destroyed and sunken in the earth, the fortress walls and buildings were monumental enough to be noticed. For some reason, however, even in the nearby modern city of Kardjali few people had heard about the ancient debris.

We were approaching the southern foots of the hill. I was taking the group through this thicket on purpose. In previous years I had repeatedly toured the vicinity. Then I had noticed an oblong depression in the thick woods, going from the south to the top. I wanted to check out this strange structure.

We made our way through the impenetrable bushes. Their thorns tore our clothes and skin. Suddenly I felt we had got into something like a large roofless corridor. It was 3-4 m wide and the side walls were vertical

and rose up beyond the tree crowns. We climbed up and our feet felt rough stone stairs stripped from the soil by the flood rains. Warily we climbed the steep staircase.

The struggle with the prickly vegetation made me lose my sense of time. We seemed to

be moving in an eternal vicious circle. Unexpectedly, dominating cliffs rose before us. A few more steps and the group came in the central hall of the palace. It was almost indiscernible among the blackberry bushes and low trees growing in the cracks.

2004, Father Boyan Saraev consecrating the newly restored chapel at the St. John Prodromus Cathedral in Kardjali, reconstructed in 2002



In the following days we worked ten hours a day. We cut trees, uprooted bushes, cleared the layers of soil. There was a dozen of us and to make progress the professor had to work alongside the students. Even harder to encourage them in the 40°C heat which lasted a whole week. The other research director of the project did not endure and returned to Sofia. But as the French say, "A la guerre comme a la guerre". The job was started and it had to be finished.

So, one fine day I went to the hilltop after the cutters had felled the last trees on the slope and we had uprooted the last bush. An incredible view opened up some thirty meters below my feet – the large central hall of the palace cut out in the rocks. The female student standing next to me exclaimed: "Oh my God! This is Kipling's city lost in the jungle!"

The discovered Perperikon became a scientific and media sensation. Televisions and newspapers made it top news, journalists and visitors flocked at the temple. For the first time after the siege of the Parliament building in Sofia in 1997, CNN broadcasted a

reportage from Bulgaria. This time about Perperikon. And I knew the Holy City would never be forgotten again.

Of course, everything during the next years was very difficult. Search for money for excavations, intrigues among archaeologists, the usual envy. Anyhow, funds were found and for the first time since 1989 the Bulgarian state financed a large-scale archaeological project. This was a great recognition for the Holy City, which in a couple of years was visited by hundreds of thousands of people.

In my thoughts I return to the beginning. To the handful of people from the Neolithic Age who traced out the way to the Holy Rock. If it had not been for them, nothing of this account would have happened. But the account would also not exist without the work of archaeologists and historians, sometimes imperceptible for the public. Because it is thanks to their efforts that many forgotten deeds of the ancient people become known. Apart from knowledge of the past, this will give our contemporaries something lost long ago, which they desperately need today.



Nikolay Ovcharov
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